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## Tony Pecinovsky, Let Them Tremble

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## Tony Pecinovsky, Let Them Tremble

### Abstract

September 2019 marked the centennial anniversary of the birth of the Communist Party of the United States of America (CPUSA), founded in 1919. The occasion was marked by celebratory events. These will continue through to September 2020. Let Them Tremble: Biographical Interventions Marking 100 Years of the Communist Party, USA by activist and journalist Tony Pecinovsky, was launched in the context of this anniversary.

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Review: Tony Pecinovsky, *Let Them Tremble: Biographical Interventions Marking 100 Years of the Communist Party, USA*, International Publishers, New York, 2019.

by Rowan Cahill.

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September 2019 marked the centennial anniversary of the birth of the Communist Party of the United States of America (CPUSA), founded in 1919. The occasion was marked by celebratory events. These will continue through to September 2020. *Let Them Tremble: Biographical Interventions Marking 100 Years of the Communist Party, USA* by activist and journalist Tony Pecinovsky, was launched in the context of this anniversary.

Some biographical background regarding author Pecinovsky is relevant. He is a member of the CPUSA, and a product of the American high school and community college systems. His politics were forged in student activism and in union and party organising. His considerable research and writing skills, evident in this book, were developed in his contributions to a wide range of progressive media outlets.

Importantly he is not a product of the university system, which helps account for the readability of *Let them Tremble*. It is devoid of the genre formalities that often hamper the accessibility of scholarly texts, and I have in mind things like specialist jargon, and philosophical perambulations accessible only to niche elites. That said, the book with its title harking back to closing paragraph of Marx and Engels' *Communist Manifesto*, is a scholarly work, attested to by the 79 pages of the endnotes and bibliography. The former are extensive, and often contain lengthy discussions and elaborations relevant to textual and research matters that would otherwise have prevented the free flow of the book. They also demonstrate a deep historiographical awareness; scholarly familiarity with primary and secondary sources; and the author's original archival research, especially in the CPUSA material housed at New York University in the Tamiment Library & Robert F. Wagner Labor Archives, an extensive collection created by the CPUSA and only comparatively recently processed (2012-14).

Born in 1977, Pecinovsky is a post-Cold War communist. This is relevant to *Let Them Tremble*. The intention of the book is to demonstrate that post-Cold War, when conventional wisdom variously depicts the CPUSA as, or assumes it to be, a marginal political force, that it was, and is, not. There is a mass of historical analyses by sympathisers and hostiles alike about the CPUSA, the bulk concentrating on what I call the heroic period of the party's history, the Popular Front through to the Cold War struggles against McCarthyism. Post-Cold War, however, the field is less travelled.

This is a historiographical imbalance Pecinovsky discusses in the Introduction to his book, commenting that "due to a lingering Red Taboo in much of US historiography considerably less has been written about this period." Further, as a by-product, this historical focus on the 'heroic period' helps render the party invisible subsequently, bringing with it the implication that the party was important once, but post-Cold War it no longer was, or is. It is at this historiographical neglect that Pecinovsky aims his book, and against this implication of irrelevancy that he rails.

Subtitled his study as 'biographical interventions', Pecinovsky has written six long essays of political biography on six CPUSA activists. The emphasis in these is on 'political biography', which in his hands minimises a great deal of the personal details of his subjects. Rather the intention is to document the engaged and committed political lives of his subjects. I see where Pecinovsky is coming from. He is not putting 'characters' into history, but political activists whose activism is not adequately credited in the historical record. If historians, or whoever, want these activists to be rendered as full human beings, then go ahead and do that, and probably make Pecinovsky's day, but that is not his mission.

In selecting his subjects Pecinovsky has avoided "party leaders who have already been given considerable biographical attention by other authors". Instead he has gathered a group of activists with what I calculate as nearly 300 years of collected activism between them. Some of these had CPUSA leadership positions, while others were never on the party pay roll. Two of them are women, an imbalance Pecinovsky explains as reflecting the male dominated nature of the CPUSA, an imbalance the party in modern times has worked to address. The chosen subjects are Arnold Johnson, Charlene Mitchell, Gus Hall, Henry Winston, Judith LeBlanc, and W. Alphaeus Hunton.

The selection is not haphazard, Pecinovsky choosing people whose collected activism runs from the 1930s through to the 2000s. While these lives and activism tend to overlap and intermingle in various ways, they were also chosen for the specialist themes and activism that tended to preoccupy each of the individual subjects. Pecinovsky's broad aim is to illustrate the diversity of CPUSA involvements, especially in the post-Cold War period.

Overall the book convincingly and powerfully portrays the CPUSA as an organisation engaged in class struggle and the pursuit of social justice in a continuing and consistent way, often very effectively so. Rather than being a marginal force post-Cold War, it has claim to a fine and robust involvement in a wide range of issues and causes and social movements. For Pecinovsky, I'd say it was 'mission accomplished'.